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ABSTRACT

Scandal has once again brought attention to the nation's child welfare system. In response to the news that Florida's child welfare bureaucracy could not account for hundreds of children supposedly in its care (2002), investigative journalists have found evidence of similar problems in other states. Ironically, the news that some states cannot even locate children comes at a time when the federal government is in the midst of trying, for the first time, to hold states accountable for achieving quantifiable outcomes for children involved with the child welfare system. These outcomes focus on the safety, permanency and stability of living arrangements, and well-being of children. The juxtaposition of high hopes for improving state accountability for foster children and the continuing legacy of poor performance by child welfare bureaucracies calls for a sober assessment of current federal efforts to help states improve outcomes. This paper critiques the national standards used in the new Child and Family Service Reviews being conducted by the federal government and suggest new directions. First, a historical perspective is provided on current federal policy and a description of the new performance measurement system. The paper then points out the conceptual limitations of the current national standards and uses empirical evidence to illustrate some of these limitations. The paper concludes with recommendations for new standards and additional efforts that will be necessary to ensure that state performance can improve. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/HTH)

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Mark Courtney, Barbara Needell, Fred Wulczyn

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National Standards in the Child and Family Services Reviews:

Time to Improve on a Good Idea

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The authors would like to thank Kristin Hislop and Jennifer Haight for their work developing the data used in the analysis and Stephanie Cuccaro-Alamin and Terry Shaw for their assistance in preparing this paper. We would also like to thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for supporting the use of longitudinal data on child welfare services populations and the participating states in the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive for making possible meaningful cross-state comparisons of child welfare services outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Sadly, scandal has once again brought attention to the nation's child welfare system. In response to the news that Florida's child welfare bureaucracy could not account for hundreds of children supposedly in its care, investigative journalists have found evidence of similar problems in other states (Anderson, 2002; Kresnak, 2002; News-Journal Wire Services, 2002). Ironically, the news that some states cannot even locate children comes at a time when the federal government is in the midst of trying, for the first time, to hold states accountable for achieving quantifiable outcomes for children involved with the child welfare system. These outcomes focus on the safety, permanency and stability of living arrangements, and well-being of children. The juxtaposition of high hopes for improving state accountability for foster children and the continuing legacy of poor performance by child welfare bureaucracies calls for a sober assessment of current federal efforts to help states improve outcomes.

In this paper we critique the national standards used in the new Child and Family Service Reviews being conducted by the federal government and suggest new directions. First, we provide a historical perspective on current federal policy and a description of the new performance measurement system. We then point out the conceptual limitations of the current national standards and use empirical evidence to illustrate some of these limitations. We conclude with recommendations for new standards and additional efforts that will be necessary to ensure that state performance can improve.

BACKGROUND

As early as the 1930's, there were those who advocated for the use of rigorous research methods to assess social programs (Rossi & Freeman, 1982). In the post WWII era, the implementation of many new, large-scale, and costly programs in the health and human services arena were accompanied by demands that these programs be evaluated. By the end of the 1950's, such evaluations were commonplace. Improvement in data collection techniques and the advent of computer technology further enhanced outcome evaluation techniques. With the tremendous expansion of social programs during the 1960's, program evaluation became an integral part of policymaking, planning and administration—a "growth industry" (Rossi & Freeman, 1982, p.22). In the early 1970's, however, economic recession led to a reappraisal of the effectiveness of many Great Society programs. Declining support for public services led to significant funding and program cuts and increased calls for accountability. Since then, performance standards and outcome monitoring have become critical to program management as both public and private funding sources demand greater accountability. Most recently, Congress passed the Government Performance Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) which required all federal agencies to work with the states to establish performance goals and monitor performance results for all federal programs (Office of Management and Budget, 2002).

This growing emphasis on accountability combined with the advent of the micro-computer helped facilitate the development of administrative databases for program management and evaluation purposes (Magura & Moses, 1986). The benefits (and challenges) of working with administrative data in child welfare have been well documented (Born, 1997, Courtney & Collins, 1994, Drake & Jonson-Reid, 1999,

English, Brandford, & Coughlan, 2000, Goerge, 1997). Over time, administrative data has taken on an increasingly important role in the evaluation of child welfare services.

From the late 1940's until 1975 the federal government collected voluntary data on foster care and adoption (USDHHS, 2002a). From then until the early 1980's little or no state specific data were reported. Activities emerging from the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Services Act (PL 96-272), such as state self-assessment and review guidelines for the enforcement of Titles IV-B and IV-E, were the beginning of the outcomes movement in child welfare (Children and Family Research Center, 2000).

In 1982, the American Public Welfare Association (APWA)—currently known as the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), began to publish data from their Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS), with funding assistance from the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF)(USDHHS, 2002a). Although VCIS provided the best available national statistics about foster care and adoption, the system had significant limitations. Data were reported via a survey instrument, filled out by the primary state agency administering child welfare programs, and were assumed to be correct. States used different reporting periods (e.g., federal fiscal year, state fiscal year, calendar year), and some states deviated from the programmatic definition categories for foster care and adoption defined by APWA. After making adjustments for internal consistency and conducting other data flow edits, APWA used VCIS to calculate annual national estimates of the number of children in care. Though these estimates were based on responses from a high of 52 states in 1982, by 1986 data from only 32 states were

available. In 1986, Congress amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act by adding section 479, which provided the directives for establishing and implementing a mandatory foster care and adoption reporting system.

It was not until 1994 that funding became available to help states implement their Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting Systems (AFCARS). The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (PL 103-66) provided enhanced funding for Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) (Federal Register, 1993a and 1993b). States could choose a stand-alone AFCARS system for which the federal government would match 50 percent costs or receive a 75 percent federal match for a SACWIS that integrated AFCARS requirements into a larger comprehensive system that also included: systems operated under the Title IV-A program (AFDC/TANF), the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)[1], systems operated under Title XIX (Medicaid), as well as systems operated under Title IV-D (child support enforcement) (Collins, 1999)). Most states have opted for the SACWIS alternative.[2] States began AFCARS data collection in 1994 with first submissions due in 1995.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) helped further promote accountability in child welfare. Section 203 of ASFA directs USDHHS to develop a set of outcome measures (including length of stay in foster care, number of foster care placements, and number of adoptions) that can be used to assess the

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[1] The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 93-247), as amended, called for the establishment of a national data collection and analysis program on child abuse and neglect. In response, USDHHS established NCANDS as a voluntary national reporting system for states.

[2] As of September 1, 2001, 4 states had completed SACWIS systems, 21 were operational, 8 partially operational, 8 were in the implementation stage, 6 in the planning stage, and 4 had no activity. (USDHHS, 2001)

performance of states in operating child protection and child welfare programs. AFSA requires that, to the extent possible, the outcome measures should be developed from AFCARS, and mandates the preparation and submission of an Annual Report to Congress regarding state-specific performance on each outcome measure. (USDHHS, 1999)[3]. A Final Rule[4] effective March, 2000, among other things, established the Child and Family Services State Reviews (CFSRs). The CFSRs assess state outcomes in three primary domains:

Safety

- Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Permanency

- Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
- The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

Family and Child Well-Being

- Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.
- Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.
- Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

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[3] The most recent Annual Report available is for 1999 and can be found online at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/cwo99/outcomes.pdf

[4] http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/laws/fed_reg/fr012500.htm

Each CFSR is a two-part process that includes a statewide assessment and an onsite review of these seven child outcomes and seven program systemic factors. [5] For the statewide assessment, the Children's Bureau prepares and transmits to the State the data profiles that contain aggregate data on the State's foster care and in home service populations. The data profiles allow each State to compare certain safety and permanency data indicators with national standards determined by the Children's Bureau.

The national standards (which are a subset of the outcomes in the Annual Reports to Congress) are based on information that is reported by States to the Detailed Case Data Component of the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Most states submit a record for each report alleging child abuse or neglect that received a disposition as a result of an investigation or an assessment during the calendar year to NCANDS (USDHHS, 2002b). Data submitted to AFCARS for any federal fiscal year contains data about all children for whom the state IV-E/IV-B agency has responsibility for placement, care or supervision (Collins, 1999). *Neither database links files for children from year to year; each year's database is essentially independent, containing information only about those children who experienced the event of interest (i.e., maltreatment disposition or foster care placement) during the year.* Currently, six statewide data indicators under the outcome domains of safety and permanency are being assessed as part of the review process. These indicators are: recurrence of maltreatment, incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care, foster care re-entries, length of time to achieve reunification,

[5] The onsite reviews began in March 2001, and will continue through 2004. See http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/geninfo/statercv.htm for schedule. The seven systemic factors include: statewide information system, case review system, quality assurance system, staff training, service

length of time to achieve adoption, and stability of foster care placement. [6] National Standards were set at approximately the point where 25% of the states who reported data had better and 75% had worse outcomes,[7] in recent NCANDS (1997-1998 calendar year) and AFCARS (1998 fiscal year) submissions, and are as follows:

Recurrence of maltreatment *--National Standard 6.1% or less:*

Of all children who were victims of substantiated or indicated child abuse and/or neglect during the first six months of the reporting period, what percent had another substantiated or indicated report within a six-month period?

Incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care–*National Standard 0.57% or less:*

Of all children in foster care during the period under review, what percent were the subject of substantiated or indicated maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff?

Stability of foster care placement--*National Standard 86.7% or more:*

Of all children who have been in foster care less than 12 months from the time of the latest removal, what percent had no more than two placement settings?

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array, agency responsiveness to the community, foster and adoptive parent licensing, and recruitment and retention.

[6] Length of stay in foster care, operationally defined as the median length of stay for a first time entry cohort, was deleted from the planned indicators because many states would not have achieved this data point for the children under review in time.

[7] See http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/hotissues/background.htm#six for more detailed information

Length of time to achieve reunification--*National Standard 76.2% or more:*

Of all children who were reunified with their parents or caretakers at the time of the discharge from foster care, what percent were reunified in less than 12 months from the time of the latest removal from home?

Length of time to achieve adoption--*National Standard 32.0% or more:*

Of all the children who exited foster care during the period under review to a finalized adoption, what percent exited care in less than 24 months from the time of the latest removal from home?

Foster care re-entries--*National Standard 8.6% or less:*

Of all the children who entered care during the year under review, what percent re-entered foster care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode.

ISSUES WITH THE CURRENT MEASURES AND APPROACH

Having reviewed their origins, we now describe some of the issues with the current federal performance measures. First, we describe some inherent problems with the use of the cross-sectional and exit cohort data that are the basis of most of the federal measures of state performance. Second, we use data from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive to examine the federal outcome measures for (1) length of time to achieve reunifications and (2) length of time to achieve adoption. Third, we describe some additional concerns with the current federal approach.

If the purpose of measuring outcomes is to provide information that can be used to examine changes in state performance over time, then performance measures should not be based on data from point-in-time cross-sections of the population or from data on exit cohorts. Both of these data sources can be biased in the sense that children entering care do not have an equal probability of appearing in the observed sample. Cross-sectional samples (e.g., all children in care at a particular point in time) tend to be biased towards those children who have relatively long stays (Barth et al., 1994). For example, a point-in-time sample of all children in care at the end of a given year will include many children from earlier annual entry cohorts who stayed more than one year, all entrants from the current year that remained in care for at least one year, but none of the short stayers from previous years and only some from the current year. In contrast, samples from exit cohorts tend to be biased towards those children from recent entry cohorts with relatively short stays in care since those with longer stays have not yet exited care. This leaves the impression that length of stay is much shorter than it is when measured using the experiences of all the children placed in foster care over time. Bias in outcome measures presents at least two problems for the federal performance improvement system. First, bias makes it impossible for entities whose performance is being assessed, in this case states, to accurately measure their success in improving performance over time. In fact, state actions based on biased insights could adversely affect outcomes despite opposite intentions. Second, bias creates an unfair basis for the federal government to determine which states must embark upon performance improvement plans and upon which states to assess financial penalties.

To the extent possible, state performance should be evaluated using data that best reflect the experiences of all the children served. For analyzing performance, it is in most instances best to group children who entered out-of-home care during a specific year, following their progress through placement until they experience some form of exit. This is the so-called entry cohort method combined with a longitudinal perspective. Because entry cohorts include all children, the inherent biases are far more limited and the data are more easily interpreted, especially if officials are trying to track change over time.

In the current plan, HHS proposes to compare states on these two indicators at two different points in time to determine whether the observed changes are consistent with better performance (i.e., more effective policies and practices). The idea is that, over time, states should be able to increase the percentage of children whose placement experiences meet the standard. To derive the estimate for reunification and adoption, the federal approach says that the standard should be applied to all children who *exit* foster care in a given year.

To illustrate the limitations of the current federal standards, we examined performance regarding the length of time to achieve reunification and adoption in six states using the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive. This archive is maintained at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and currently has data on 1.2 million children in twelve states. The period of our analysis stretches from 1990 to 1999 and provides an unprecedented look at state performance through the federal lens. For this period we developed two measures of state performance. First, we calculated the federal performance measures for exit cohorts in each state in each year for the reunification and adoption measures. Second, we created measures for both

reunification and adoption based on entry cohorts. Specifically, for reunification we calculated the percentage of children who entered in each year who were reunified within twelve months of entry. For adoption, we calculated for each entry cohort the percentage of children adopted within twenty-four months of entry.

Table 1 shows the performance of six states for the 1990-1999 exit cohorts on the current federal performance measure for family reunification. Thus, for each year the table shows the percentage of children who exited care in that year that did so within twelve months of their most recent removal from home. Table 2 shows state performance in reunifying children with their families using entry cohort data. Specifically, the table shows the percentage of children entering care in each year that were reunified within twelve months of removal from home.

Table 1
Of Exits to Reunification, Percent that Exited Within 12 Months
of Entry to Care by State and Exit Year

	State					
Exit Year	A	B	C	D	E	F
1990	67.1%	64.6%	74.2%	68.6%	61.1%	76.7%
1991	60.4%	62.2%	70.9%	64.8%	49.6%	74.5%
1992	61.7%	59.9%	72.9%	64.4%	45.0%	70.5%
1993	60.5%	59.6%	70.6%	62.6%	48.4%	65.6%
1994	59.1%	66.3%	67.6%	66.2%	48.9%	70.8%
1995	57.5%	62.4%	67.7%	66.4%	47.1%	72.7%
1996	46.4%	60.5%	67.0%	67.4%	56.0%	73.5%
1997	41.9%	61.6%	65.3%	69.0%	59.3%	72.1%
1998	36.9%	65.9%	60.3%	67.5%	58.3%	70.5%
1999	39.4%	65.4%	59.9%	68.3%	54.6%	73.9%

Table 2
Of All Children Entering Care, Percent Exiting to Reunification Within 12 Months
by State and Entry Year

	State					
Entry Year	A	B	C	D	E	F
1990	26.3%	29.0%	32.2%	41.3%	24.8%	42.6%
1991	20.7%	29.1%	31.9%	40.1%	23.4%	41.5%
1992	17.9%	28.6%	33.7%	40.7%	23.6%	42.9%
1993	14.9%	28.2%	33.3%	38.6%	23.6%	46.3%
1994	14.1%	26.5%	30.4%	38.7%	23.1%	45.4%
1995	15.5%	27.4%	31.3%	38.1%	23.3%	43.2%
1996	15.1%	23.8%	27.9%	38.0%	23.7%	37.6%
1997	16.6%	20.6%	18.3%	37.3%	24.7%	37.9%
1998	15.7%	23.4%	14.9%	37.6%	24.3%	34.7%
1999*	10.2%	14.6%	9.3%	24.9%	16.8%	21.9%

* Data current through 12/31/1999. Data for 1999 are incomplete.

Table 3
Of Exits to Adoption Percent Occurring Within 24 Months of
Entry to Care by State and Exit Year

Exit Year	A	B	C	D	E	F
1990	27.8%	39.9%	37.5%	15.2%	13.2%	35.4%
1991	24.9%	37.7%	35.9%	15.3%	8.1%	27.9%
1992	20.9%	37.1%	33.6%	14.1%	7.3%	25.3%
1993	16.6%	33.8%	29.2%	12.5%	5.7%	24.2%
1994	14.4%	34.1%	27.4%	12.7%	5.7%	14.3%
1995	11.7%	41.0%	27.5%	14.2%	5.0%	14.8%
1996	10.3%	40.6%	22.9%	14.6%	4.7%	18.7%
1997	7.3%	77.0%	23.0%	10.9%	4.9%	21.9%
1998	7.4%	59.8%	24.9%	15.4%	4.5%	21.4%
1999	7.0%	42.8%	27.0%	14.6%	5.3%	18.2%

Table 4
Of All Children Entering Care, Percent Exiting to Adoption Within 24 Months
by State and Entry Year

	State					
Entry Year	A	B	C	F	G	H
1990	2.2%	6.4%	4.7%	1.7%	0.7%	1.5%
1991	1.6%	6.8%	3.9%	2.0%	0.8%	1.4%
1992	1.8%	7.5%	3.2%	1.3%	0.9%	1.4%
1993	1.4%	8.5%	3.4%	2.2%	1.0%	1.2%
1994	1.3%	8.5%	2.8%	1.9%	1.1%	1.1%
1995	1.9%	7.0%	3.0%	1.7%	1.1%	1.5%
1996	2.6%	11.3%	3.5%	2.0%	1.0%	2.4%
1997	4.6%	22.1%	4.2%	2.3%	1.1%	1.9%
1998*	3.2%	7.9%	3.5%	1.2%	0.6%	1.3%
1999*	0.3%	1.9%	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%	0.3%

* Data current through 12/31/1999. Data for 1998 and 1999 are incomplete.

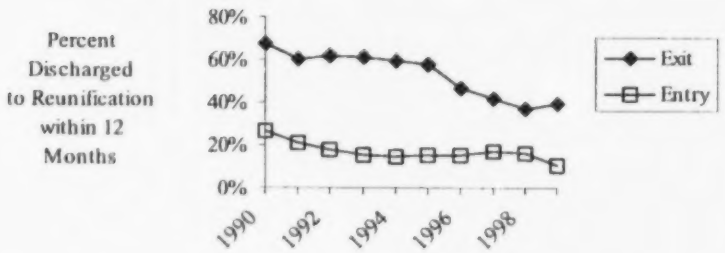
Table 3 shows the performance for six states for the 1990-1999 exit cohorts on the current federal performance measure for adoption. For each year the table shows the percentage of children who exited care in that year that did so within twenty-four months of their most recent removal from home. Table 4 shows state performance in reunifying children with their families using entry cohort data. Specifically, the table shows the percentage of children entering care in each year that were adopted within twelve months of removal from home.

Each state's data tell a somewhat different story. However, two themes emerge. First, exit cohort data significantly overestimate both the proportion of children who are reunified within 12 months and the proportion of children adopted within 24 months. This is completely consistent with the idea that exit cohorts favor children who have been in foster care for shorter periods. For example, of the children reunified in 1990, about 67 percent had been care for 12 months or fewer prior to discharge. That figure dropped

rather dramatically, falling to near 40 percent in 1998, suggesting a period when state performance was falling behind. In any event, a figure of 40 percent is considerably higher than the comparable entry cohort figure. This same pattern characterizes the adoption data.

Second, performance trends – changes in outcomes over time – are sensitive to whether one considers only children who are exiting care or if one chooses to look at a series of entry cohorts. In fact, if the experience of these six states is any indication, one should expect the trends observed for exit cohorts to differ from those observed for entry cohorts rather than to be similar. This is true for both reunification and adoption. We use state A to illustrate the divergence in outcomes trends between exit and entry cohorts. In State A, the entry and exit perspectives provide a similar view of state performance in family reunification from 1990 through 1993 (see Figure 1). Performance was trending downward. The downward trend continued throughout the 1990s if the data are viewed from the exit perspective. However, starting in 1994, the entry data show a slight improvement in the proportion of children admitted who went home in 12 months. The adoption data are even more striking (see Figure 2). In short, adoption performance improved through the mid to late 1990s even though the exit perspective shows continued declines. Moreover, the magnitude of performance differences is exaggerated when viewed from the exit perspective. Clearly, if the purpose of the federal performance measures is to create a meaningful and reliable metric by which to assess state performance over time and upon which states can base program planning, then the federal government should replace the current measures.

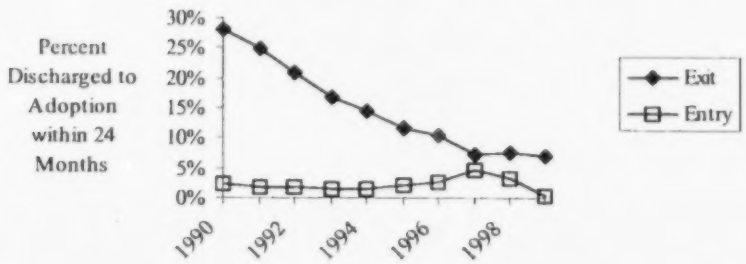
Figure1: State A, Exits to Reunification within 12 months of Entry to Care, as of 12/31/1999



Notes:

- Exit - Percent of exits to reunification in a given year occurring within 12 months of entry to care. (HHS/CFSR).
- Entry - Of all children entering care during a given year, percent exiting to reunification within 12 months.

Figure 2: State A, Exits to Adoption within 24 Months of Entry to Care, as of 12/31/1999



Notes:

- Exit - Percent of exits to adoption in a given year occurring within 24 months of entry to care. (HHS/CFSR).
- Entry – Of all children entering care during a given year, percent exiting to adoption within 24 months.

We now turn to other limitations of the HHS performance standards, some of which can be dealt with through improved use of state administrative data, others that will require more serious thought by policymakers about the intent behind the new focus on accountability. An obvious limitation of the current performance measures is the fact that they are not *risk adjusted*. In other words, they do not take into account between-state differences in the characteristics of the children and families receiving child welfare services. For example, observed differences in state performance relative to any of the national standards may have more to do with demography than program performance, given that children's age and race, and a state's urbanicity, are all related to outcomes such as reunification and adoption (Wulczyn, Brunner Hislop, & Goerge, 2000). Of course, adjusting for risk would not be easy since the relationship between various risk factors and many child welfare outcomes is far from clear. Moreover, few state administrative databases have data on many potentially important risk factors (e.g., children's prenatal substance exposure, parental housing instability). Nevertheless, at present a performance assessment system could be developed that adjusts state performance based on basic demographic data that are available in nearly every state's management information system.

An additional challenge is the fact that changes in performance at one point in the child welfare system can have marked effects at other points in the system in ways that confound performance measurement. For example, hypothetical State A may be much more successful than State B in establishing community-based family supports that succeed in diverting children from out-of-home care. In the process, State A may end up with a more troubled population than State B in out-of-home care and fare worse relative

to out-of-home care performance standards. Ironically, in this scenario the better performing state is penalized for its success. Once again, in principle this problem can be addressed, if these kinds of system dynamics are understood, by adjusting measures of state performance. For example, the measure of state performance in reunifying children with their families could be adjusted by a measure of foster care incidence in the state, if this were shown to be a good indicator of the challenges to serving the families of children in care. In reality, knowledge of child welfare services caseload dynamics is not yet at a place to facilitate such calculations.

A more fundamental but less understood potential problem with the federal performance standards is the likelihood that they will lead states to change their policies and practices in unintended ways. Given the possible fiscal penalties for failure to meet the national standards, states have a strong incentive to alter policy and practice to improve any outcome for which they are not meeting the standard. In addition, heightened attention to these outcomes by state advocacy groups is likely to put even more pressure on states to improve when they are out of compliance.

This may not sound like such a bad thing, but given how little is known about the sensitivity of the outcomes to various administrative practices and the relationship of population characteristics to the performance outcomes, there is great potential for unintended consequences. For example, one way for states to increase the percentage of children reunified with their families within twelve months would be to increase the number of children admitted to care for a very short period. There is already great between-state variation in the use of short-term shelter care, and, given the current reunification outcome measure, this variation favors states with high shelter utilization.

However, it seems unlikely that Congress intended states to increase their use of short-term foster care in order to "catch up" with states that are meeting the family reunification performance measure.

A similar problem emerges with respect to state choices about who to serve in their child welfare systems. For example, some states continue to serve status offenders in their foster care systems while others have ceased doing so. Given the reasons that these youth enter care (i.e., running away from home and other parent-child problems) it seems that they might be more likely to move back and forth between care and home than younger children placed primarily because of parental abuse or neglect. They might also experience a higher number of placements while in out-of-home care due to their behavior problems. Thus, all else being equal, states choosing to admit status offenders to care might expect to fare less favorably than other states on some of the current performance measures and to face the resulting fiscal penalties. Yet, it is far from clear that Congress intended states to stop caring for status offenders because of the new performance standards.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we believe that there is clear and convincing evidence that national standards that are a part of the Child and Family Services Reviews should not be based on measures derived from cross-sectional or exit cohort data. Performance measures based on such data are prone to certain biases. The extent of these biases is well understood. Furthermore, we believe that even measures based on entry cohort data will

not solve all of the problems facing the laudable effort to increase state accountability for serving maltreated children and their families. What should be done to move forward?

First, the federal outcomes need to include an entry cohort perspective. As part of that process, greater attention should be paid to how the measures themselves are constructed. This is not a significant problem. For example, state and county child welfare agencies in New York, Illinois and California have all developed alternatives, based on entry cohort data, to the HHS performance measures. The more difficult problem, relatively speaking, has to do with the source of data at the federal level. In part, the current measures were adopted because the federal AFCARS data system has a limited capacity to produce entry cohort data.[8] For this reason, AFCARS needs to be redesigned. Of course, this means that state AFCARS submissions will change. However, it is important to point out that well-tested database designs exist.[9] While some cost would be involved in a conversion, most modern SACWIS systems can produce entry cohort data using a longitudinal framework (i.e., tracking children over time). The same is true of older, legacy systems. Such a shift in measurement strategies would vastly improve states' ability to monitor child welfare programs and execute meaningful reform.

Second, a different process of federal-state interaction around program improvement should be developed in order to make the most of better outcome measures

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[8] The problem also exists in the current method for NCANDS data collection.

[9] Both the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California at Berkeley have worked with states for over ten years in developing such database systems. In addition, the Jordan Center for Children and Families and the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have assisted numerous sites with the construction of longitudinal databases to track outcomes as a part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative.

while avoiding unintended consequences. Presently, the focus of Child and Family Service Reviews is on determining if states are "in substantial conformity" with various outcomes and systemic factors. The current national standards are a part of the assessment of several of the outcomes regarding safety and permanency, and it is not possible to achieve substantial conformity on those outcomes in this first Review cycle without meeting the standards. When a state is found to be out of compliance, the focus shifts to the state's plan for achieving substantial conformity. Unfortunately it is hard to see how in the current context states can develop a performance improvement plan that has a reasonable hope of success. Even putting aside the fact that the current federal measures are likely to lead the states astray, the knowledge base regarding the relationship between population characteristics, programs and practices, and child welfare outcomes is so poor as to offer little sound guidance for program improvement (Courtney, 2000). This is an environment that is ripe for quick-fix consultants that have nothing worthwhile to sell and administrative gaming strategies that "improve" measured outcomes at the cost of serious and unintended consequences.

A better approach would be for the federal government to see the movement towards outcome measurement as an opportunity for the field of child welfare services to learn about the relationships between policy, program, and outcome. If fiscal sanctions are deemed necessary for political reasons, or because some states simply will not take the process seriously without them, then so be it. Nevertheless, the primary focus of the Child and Family Service Review process should be to better understand *why* states are achieving particular constellations of outcomes. It is only through the acquisition of such

knowledge that child welfare systems will be able to achieve meaningful change in child and family outcomes.

This will require developing better capacity for using data for program evaluation and planning within both the federal and state child welfare bureaucracies. Clearly, a federal bureaucracy that is unable or unwilling to improve on the flawed performance measures that are now in place is ill equipped to move the field forward. Our experience tells us that very few states are in a position to do much better. In the past ten years, states have vastly improved their data systems, but have not done commensurate work in developing the human resources necessary to make use of all the new data. Federal and state legislatures must devote resources to helping public child welfare agencies carry out their accountability function. States should replicate, perhaps with the help of the federal government, promising partnerships between state child welfare agencies and university-based researchers. This capacity will not appear overnight, but it will not appear at all without a serious and sustained commitment of resources.

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